(S)kittish

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by lurkinglurkerwholurks

Summary

*Cass didn't understand the concept of **fair** most of the time. Now, though, Cass thought she might be approaching an understanding.*

——Can be read as a standalone——

Notes

Whumptober prompt 4 (waking up disoriented), 20 (fetal position), 21 (you're safe now), 31 (comfort, bedside vigil), alt3 (dazed and confused), alt15 (tears)

Quick note at the beginning for new folks: I do what I want with canon, so here Cassandra is Black Bat but she's wearing the mouthless all-black outfit because it's objectively the best look. Also, some oblique references are made to The Return, but all you need to know is that when Bruce got lost in time, Cassandra immediately bailed because he was her family, not the rest of them.

Cass didn't understand the concept of *fair* most of the time. It was the emptiest of words, which meant a lot considering Cass found most words empty, like fragile porcelain cups tipped on their sides and cracked useless. The others used it—never Bruce, or Alfred, but the younger ones, and even Dick sometimes, in a voice that went deliberately flat as if to fight against a rise—and people on the street and in shows, people she overheard, but she was never convinced she understood the concept. Things were as they were. *Fair* was a different thing from *right* or *just*, which were also words that were just as slippery, but that struck a voiceless resonance deep inside her in a way that *fair* did not.

Now, though, Cass thought she might be approaching an understanding. Cats were not fair in a way that specifically aggrieved her, which she thought might be a vital component to *fairness*.

It did not seem *fair*, for instance, that kittens were so lovely. She had never much paid attention to cats in her old life, as they were not survival, and survival was what she needed. When she had noticed them, she had liked them. What was not to like about a creature that kept its own counsel but was readable in a way that humans were readable—that is to say, perfectly plainly, if you knew how to look, though few seemed to try.

Cass looked, and she found them sensible. Of course a fast, frontal approach by a stranger would be seen as aggressive. Of course crowding one's space without permission was a cause for offense. Sitting near but not next, in total silence and apparent disinterest was a valid form of bonding. Turning one's back was an act of trust. Staring unblinkingly was off-putting and offensive. Slow, languid blinks were markers of affection.

Cass understood all this easily. It was one of the reasons she had so quickly trusted Bruce. He was very like a cat. She didn't think that was why that woman liked him so much, but Cass also didn't think that his cat-ness hurt. It certainly hadn't hurt with Cass.

Cats were also very soft, and Cass liked soft things. She liked nearly everything about cats—their sleek or fluffy fur, their triangled noses, their expressive tails. She liked the kitten that lived in her home now, at least in theory. It had arrived in her absence, a pleasant surprise, when most surprises weren't. It was very small and very frightened. It made itself bigger any time anyone looked at it, and the effort made it seem that much smaller. It had black fur with white paws, a white tuft

on its chest, and a white cap to its tail, like a little suit. In a family of both suits and suits, Cass found the kitten entirely appropriate.

Also appropriate, but less appealing, was its ability to perform inexplicable disappearances from the one place it was allowed to be (Damian's room) and reappearances in others where it was not (everywhere else.) This usually did not cause too much trouble. Damian was very responsible with his pet and spent a good deal of time with it, so he was quick to notice when it went missing. Wary as it was of others, the kitten took care not to cross paths with the humans of the house when it went on its adventures.

The kitten was not allowed in Cass's room. This was not her rule, not exactly. It was Bruce's rule, and Alfred's, because the first time Cass met the kitten, it was clear they couldn't be in the same space without Cass's face melting. That's what it had felt like, anyways, the sudden slide of her eyes and nose and mouth into liquid form like an ice cream zapped in a microwave. Cass, for all her self-preservation, wouldn't have connected the attack to the hissing ball of fur in Damian's arms, but Bruce had explained the concept of allergies as best he could.

This was all top of mind for Cassandra at present because as she lay sprawled on her bed, she sneezed three times in a row, which meant the kitten was somewhere in her room.

From her jumbled puddle of limbs on the bed, Cass briefly considered ignoring her intruder and trying to fall asleep. Patrol had been long, wet, and cold, a miserable combination. Though changed, Cass had been looking forward to being completely still and unconscious for the next six hours or so. She didn't want to move. She didn't want to get up. She didn't want to hunt for one tiny kitten in the various nooks of her room.

She sneezed again, so hard it made the back of her throat hurt. Cass took a small, measured breath, then rolled onto her side, off the bed, and onto her feet. She didn't groan, but she thought about it, which meant a lot from Cass. She spent most of her waking hours free of the influence of David Cain, but not all, and she had never shaken the unwillingness to make noise except when absolutely necessary. Voicing irritation was not necessary.

Wary of where the kitten might be and how close she might have to come to make her face melt, Cass sucked in a breath and held it as she scanned the room. It wasn't a very large space, by design. Though

Bruce had first placed Cass in a standard Manor bedroom the size of a —well, she wasn't sure what it had been the size of, other than *very large*—after several weeks of Cass squirreling herself away as quickly and neatly as the kitten, a compromise had been reached. One of the windowed walk-in closets down the hall had been walled off from its corresponding bedroom but retained its connection to the bathroom. The result had been a cozy little nook with level after level of empty shelves, a single window, and just enough room for a full bed. Cass had been thrilled.

Unfortunately, Cass had had enough time at this point to truly nest, which meant dozens of little nooks, crannies, piles, and mounds that a small but determined cat could hide in, under, behind, or on top of. Cass had to draw in four more breaths as she searched, and her eyes were already stinging, tears blurring her vision faster than she could blink them away.

It didn't occur to her to ask for help. Cass didn't ask for help, not from anyone, not even Bruce. Besides, it was a very small kitten, and perhaps she could give it a little pet before she returned it to Damian's room. That might be worth the trouble.

She hoped it was worth the trouble. By the time she noticed the green glint of reflective lenses at the very back corner of the shadows under her bed, Cass's head felt full and prickly like it had been stuffed with the hay Scarecrow sometimes carefully sewing to the cuffs of his shirts. (Tim called it *pretentious*. Cass wasn't sure what that meant, but the word felt as silly as the act of sewing dried grass to one's sleeves looked, so she conditionally agreed.) The kitten stared at her, unblinking, which was good because all she could see were the eyes and a faint outline of a hunched back and rump.

Cass wiped her face on her shirt and considered what to do next.

"Hello?" she began slowly. "It's okay. You are okay. It is safe. I am here to help."

Bruce had taught her some of these, for use on patrol. She understood tone, trusted it more than words, but sometimes people needed to hear specific phrases to feel okay, like a set of passcodes she was only beginning to understand. She wasn't sure if cats were the same way.

The little smudge hissed.

Please, she wanted to say, *I am very tired and do not like my face wet and my nose full. The sneezing hurts. I am sorry, but please go away.*

Unfortunately, the sneezing made it hard to remember the right words, and she was fairly certain that cats did not understand hand signs. And Cass was a very patient person until she wasn't.

With a huff, Cass pushed forward with her toes and slithered under the bed, snatching at the kitten with both hands. Despite her near blindness and rapid-fire sneezing, Cass expected an efficient scoop and rescue. Instead, she found her hands full of a tiny, snarling, spitting whirlwind of teeth and claws. She managed to pull it from under the bed, working backwards on her thighs and elbows until she could kneel upright, but bobbled the kitten when it let out a throaty howl. She caught it again, but the change in position let the creature twist and sink its claws into her forearm.

Cass hurried to the door. The pain wasn't enough to merit her attention, but she was worried about accidentally hurting the little creature by trying to keep it in her arms. Better to let it free rather than risk further damage through fright or a fall. She bent in a low, scooping motion and shoved the kitten into the hall, shutting the door behind it with a whispered "Sorry."

This was better anyways, she decided as she sagged against the wall and scrubbed her face with the hem of her sweatshirt. Bad things might have happened if she had been caught with the kitten. Damian would have been angry, surely, and accused her of stealing his pet. Or Bruce or Alfred would have been disappointed in her for holding the kitten when she wasn't supposed to, or angry at Damian for it getting loose. She especially didn't want the latter to happen. The Manor was at peace, at long last, but the truce felt like the thin film of new ice, too easily cracked by the slightest pressure.

There was cat hair on her hoodie. Cass sighed to herself and stripped, dropping the now inside-out bundle of cloth on the floor as she shuffled to the bathroom to rinse her eyes. There was also a line of blood trickling down her arm from the kitten's claws, matched by pinpricks of teeth closer to her wrist. She gave them a cursory rinse as well, having more than once been on the receiving end of Alfred's disappointed frown in regards to stained linens.

The cold water felt good on her eyes, and after snagging another hoodie from a different floor pile, Cass crawled into bed, under her covers, and was asleep within minutes.

It was strange, being back in the Manor. Cass had thought she would

never be here again, that the home its walls represented had crumbled and burned along with Bruce. But Bruce was back. And she was back. So why did feel like she had come back to the wrong house?

"Why don't you ask Damian to spar with you," Bruce suggested, his eyes never leaving the screen. It wasn't a question. His voice stayed flat and blunt, like a broom pole against her spine, nudging her to do as he said.

Cass wished it *were* a broom pole, so she could snatch it from him and break it in half over her knee. She knew what he was doing. He had been upset that she had left after his "death" and wanted her to connect with the others. To be friends. Like they weren't still scared of her. Like she had any interest in being friends with *them*.

I want to spar with *you*, Cass signed, but Bruce still wasn't looking. Her fingertips twitched, fighting the impulse to reach out and pinch the side of his neck, to *make* him look.

She waited. And waited. And waited. Irritation and pent-up energy itched down her legs like ants, but she didn't move. Bruce finally turned his head, his attention still half-caught by his work like a sticky-hand toy clinging to the wall.

"Sweetheart," Bruce said with a flat sort of patience that made Cassandra frown when the name usually made her smile, "I need to focus on this case, and you need to spar more with other members of the team."

He said more, but the words buzzed like gnats around her head, and Cass batted them away. She wanted to spar with *Bruce*. She wanted to knock this itchy-jumpy-scratchy feeling out of her body. She wanted to feel the familiar collision of his strength, his might, the way they fought together that felt like a living puzzle. Sometimes it felt like if she weren't touching Bruce that he wasn't there at all, that she would blink and wake up behind some trash heap on the other side of the world, the last few months nothing more than a pleasant dream.

Cass turned away, Bruce still speaking buzzing words that quieted as she left the platform and stalked to the exercise equipment. Damian and Dick were sparring, so she wasn't being disobedient, just polite by not interrupting. She didn't even stomp her feet the way she wanted to.

Cass huffed to herself as she kicked the bag, wishing the sting of her foot connecting with the vinyl did anything at all. She was aware of

Dick and Damian's attention, both focused on their playfight but with glances cast her way that they thought she wouldn't notice. They were always aware of where she was, or thought they were. Damian especially marked her every move when they were in the same space. He still saw her as a threat, both physically and to his place in the family. She didn't begrudge him that. He was right about the former and thought the latter about everyone, not just her. He prickled like a little bushpig every time he saw her with Bruce. Dick, for his part, was also wary, maybe still remembering when she had threatened him in the past, but he hid any unease under a warm smile.

Her kicks were becoming more aggressive, the smack of body against bag louder and sharper in the echoing Cave. Bruce didn't seem to notice, but the other two were signaling agitation with their tense limbs and pointed not-looks. She kept going, until the friction of attention rubbed its way under her skin.

Fine. That was a lying word, an opposite word, and Cass had to admit that it felt good to envision the way her teeth would have to scrape hard against her bottom lip to spit it out. She didn't. It was an unnecessary noise.

Cass abandoned the bag, moving to the pullup bar instead. The rapid up-down motion helped some, but the exercise was too easy, so she paused to add weights to her ankles and tried again. The additional difficulty helped a little, and the strain aggravated the healing cuts on her arm, and that sting helped, too, mild though it was.

Finally, she gave up. Dick had begun to shift his stance, as if mulling options. One of those options was going to be ending his training with Damian to invite Cass to spar, which would make Damian angry and wouldn't relieve the itch in her limbs. She was angry. Worse, she was angry that she was angry, because she knew the open case on the computer was important and that she couldn't have Bruce's attention just because she wanted it. But she did want it. And she didn't want to cause problems with the other two, particularly when she was too agitated to deflect Damian's prickles peaceably.

With a sharp huff, Cass dropped from the bar, unshackled her ankles, and stalked off to the locker room before Dick could make up his mind to call out to her. She would seek some other way to center herself before patrol.

That was the plan, anyways. Abovestairs, Cass was en route to the ballroom when Alfred caught her and redirected her back to the

second floor. Her room needed tidying, he said. Something about laundry, something about food. Cass had to fight not to fidget, not to make a face. Her room was fine. It was her room. She didn't want to clean, she wanted to blast music in the ballroom and dance, cocooned in sound and privacy while the other three stayed downstairs.

Alfred was watching her expectantly, his flow of words finally at its end. Cass nodded, not sure what she was agreeing to and not really caring. His lips twitched beneath the mustache. Irritation? Amusement? She couldn't tell. Some mix of the two maybe, or a third emotion she had been too distracted to read. She had the uncomfortable feeling he knew she hadn't been listening, and that sent slimy shivers down her back. Bad things happened when she was caught not listening. Fists and gunshots and pain.

Cass knew better than to flinch back, but she nodded more emphatically and hurried down the hall, eyes heavy on her until she disappeared around the corner. No ballroom, then, because they would hear the music. But not her room because her room was small and her room was safe, but now it was *too* small, like a trap, like a cage, and too many knew to find her there.

She had no answer. Cass spent the long hours until patrol stalking the Manor halls, unable to settle, unable to sit still. The air lay heavy on her like a heated blanket, and she couldn't decide if she was… She couldn't decide. She didn't know.

Patrol should have helped. Pulling the mask down over her face stripped away the noise, the confusion, the feelings. In the muffled dark of the mask, she was not Cassandra, not Girl, not anyone except Black Bat. Black Bat did not feel anger or fear or sadness. Black Bat did not worry about anyone with the last name Wayne. Black Bat was flight. Black Bat was shadow. Black Bat was dance and fist and wing.

Cass didn't understand why no one else seemed to have the same clarity. Only a partial team was out tonight, with Red Robin away with the Titans and Red Hood in his own orbit. But it was Dick and Damian bickering on comms, not Nightwing and Robin. It was Bruce's speculative gaze that followed her from rooftop to rooftop. They clung to their dual identities, dragging messiness into the field despite warnings about code names and chatter on comms. Even Batman, who most cleanly separated himself into Wayne and Bat, was letting himself leak.

Nightwing's indecision from earlier had reformed into a desire to

“connect,” but there was nothing connective for Cass about words, and Nightwing loved his words. It wasn’t that she didn’t understand why he tried. She had watched him shower a stoic and unresponsive Batman with his chatter, water softening rock into something smooth and calm. But she was not Batman, she was Black Bat, and every time he approached to speak, she would flit away to another rooftop, a different shadow. And every time she did, Batman’s frown deepened.

She was a good team member. She was. She was Black Bat. She didn’t need to be like them to be what Gotham needed. She didn’t need to talk about the weather to be good.

She would prove it.

Black Bat made sure she ran the fastest, swung the highest, landed the quietest, spotted trouble first, punched first, ended trouble first. Nightwing had given up on trying to “connect,” and the others allowed her to pull herself further and further away from the flock. Only Batman kept pace, but she didn’t want to talk to him either. He would ask questions and expect answers, and she didn’t have answers, at least none that she was unashamed to give, and certainly none that she could explain with clumsy, empty words.

She could sense Batman’s growing irritation, and it raised the hair along her arms, up the back of her neck. Her anger rose with it, matching his frustration with her own inner gnashing of teeth, like a dog baying at the very end of a fraying lead. The night felt stifling, and anger and bitter sickness mixed in the hollow of her throat with an acidic chill. Black Bat suddenly, desperately wanted to sit for a moment. She wanted to find somewhere high, where she could sit with her bare face in the wind, above the exhaust of the streets and the eyes peering out of the dark, and rest with her shoulder pressed against Bruce’s.

But he had no plans to sit. She could read the intent in the angle of his spine, the set of his hands. He meant to circle, to corner her, to scold or interrogate. Black Bat felt less bat, more mouse, scampering from bolthole to bolthole.

They were in a warehouse near the docks when it all went bad. She told herself that she had made the decision herself to plunge from the rafters where the bats had settled to dive into the middle of the smugglers and scatter them like roaches. She would have told herself, if she had been thinking at all, if the hot, jangling sick in her chest hadn’t yanked her down like hands around her wrists.

Hitting smugglers felt better than kicking a bag. Black Bat was vengeance, she was the night, she was justice delivered from on high to those who would hurt, would steal, would deceive. Even the explosion of guns, the narrow heat of bullets flying by, they felt right. She felt no fear at all, until the smugglers all lay groaning on the ground and Batman was rounding on her, scowl as dark as his cape.

“Black Bat,” he growled, and she didn’t flinch, but only just. Anger crackled off him like static.

She half-turned to face him, her surly *what* in her stance rather than her hands.

“You are supposed to wait for my signal.” His hands moved with his mouth, echoing the reminder that stung like a rebuke. “You were reckless.”

She shook her head shortly. Their targets were all down, their goods seized. She had done most of the work herself, dropping men before the others could even touch their feet to the ground.

“Robin was almost shot,” Batman barked, jabbing one finger behind her.

She whirled, looking for the little one. He stood with an arm extended, Nightwing kneeling to study the fleshy part beneath his shoulder where the costume had peeled away from bleeding skin.

“I am well,” Robin insisted, voice raised for the others to hear. His voice and stance were both annoyed, but his bottom lip puckered slightly.

He’s fine, you’ve had worse, her eyes said.

Because of you, her brain insisted.

“You jeopardized the mission,” Batman was saying, his voice still hard, big words like sharp outcroppings in an unyielding cliff face.

I did my job, Cass snapped back, fingers as sharp as his words. **Problem solved. You are welcome.**

“You didn’t work with the team.”

I don’t NEED the team.

“You put *everyone* in danger.” Finally, finally, his voice boomed,

echoing through the cavernous warehouse like another gunshot. **Bad,** his fingers smacked down.

Bad? No. No, she wasn't bad, she was *good*, she was stopping bad people from doing bad things. How DARE he—

"Home," Batman ordered, hands and mouth in sync once more. "Now."

Cassandra stared at him, mouth empty of anything to say and hands too full of things she didn't dare. Then she crushed her fingers into fists and stomped in the direction of the Manor. Three pairs of eyes watched. No one called her back.

She was four blocks away when Agent A clicked into her earpiece. Cassandra reached into her hood and pulled it out before she could hear more than her own name. She didn't want to hear it. If she heard one more word, she was going to scream, truly scream, right there on the rooftop, but she was afraid of what else might happen if she opened her mouth.

Cass went home, not away into the night like she wanted to, but she ignored Alfred's greeting and shook with anger as she stalked upstairs. If she was bad for the team, then she didn't need to wait for them to return. She wouldn't wait up to make sure they made it home safe, she wouldn't wait for whatever flow of words Bruce had prepared, and she wouldn't leave her door open. If he tried to wish her goodnight or rest a palm on her head, she would bite his hand. She clenched the sheets in the dark, in shaking, white-knuckled fists, and waited.

She was still shaking when she woke again, disoriented and tangled in the dark. She didn't know where she was, who she was, what was happening.

Sick was the alarm her body was ringing. *Danger. GO.*

This was one language she understood inherently, viscerally, and never ignored its warnings.

She went. Clumsy and wobble-legged, crawling across soft obstacles to paw at the latch hidden behind the bed frame. Instinct knew the way, even if her mind was still asleep.

Sick was bad. Sick was weak. Weakness meant pain. She needed to hide. Find a spot no one would look, then find a way to heal from there.

She wasn't sure what was wrong. Hot, too hot, burning in halls chilly against her skin. Head hurt—she stumbled, added *dizzy* to the list. More than her head hurt, couldn't pinpoint it as she ran on fumbling but still silent feet. Thirsty, so thirsty, mouth hot and cottony. Ran like she was being attacked, though there was no one, no sound, no movement.

Ran until she could run no more. Instinct kept her inside, within the walls that meant safe, that meant home, protected from the worse that prowled outside. She knew the difference, between without and within, even if she was too muddled to remember within *what*.

Fingertips found the lid, lifted, pulled herself inside. It was small, knees pulled up to her chest and clasped tight, breath bouncing back into her face, too dark to see. Safe. She let consciousness slip from her hands.

When she woke again, it was to an attack. Light like knives to the face and hands grabbing at her arms. Instinct was first again, driving her hands to scratch and her feet to kick, and then she flinched, throwing up her arms in defense, expecting a slap or worse.

There was a voice, rough like gravel scraping against itself, repeating sounds that slowly turned into a word.

"Cassandra. *Cassandra.*"

The hands weren't lifting her anymore. One pushed her bangs off her sticky forehead. The other cupped her cheek.

Not hurting. Gentle hands. Familiar, with callouses that scratched against her skin in a way she knew. Good hands.

A good voice.

Her name.

He was saying her name.

Bruce.

Cassandra let out a squeak of a sob and squinted up through blurry eyes.

From somewhere above her, a slow breath out through the nose.

He spoke again, in a voice so low she wasn't sure she was meant to

hear, in words she would only decipher later as, “You scared me to death, sweetheart.”

Louder, but still in a low rumble, “You’re burning up. We need to get you to the infirmary.”

Yes, Bruce would take care of her. He would make her feel better. He —no! She couldn’t leave the small space. It wasn’t safe to be sick, to be known as sick, as weak.

She croaked in protest, stiffening against the wooden walls to keep herself inside. She was terrified of leaving her safe little box. Even with Bruce. Bruce couldn’t protect her from everything. He *died* and she ran. He wasn’t here. He had left her and she had been alone and he didn’t understand what happened—

Maybe she had babbled aloud, or maybe he was beginning to read her as well as she could read him. He could have pried her free, if he really wanted, but instead he settled back to stroking her head.

“Cassandra. I’m not going to lift you out yet, but I need to see what’s wrong.”

She was bad. That’s what was wrong. She was bad. She was wrong and bad and she didn’t fit. She wanted so badly to fit, to help, but she was angry and she was prickly and she had no words or her words were wrong or her room was wrong and she didn’t know how to be what they needed her to be and she just wanted—she wanted—she wanted—

Cass wept, collapsing in on herself. As soon as she went limp, Bruce lifted her out of the box, but only to enclose her again in walls of soft fabric and strong arms that blocked out the light, the world.

He didn’t shush her. He never shushed her. But his words ran over each other like water over rocks as his hand cradled her head against his thumping heart.

It’s okay. You are okay. You’re safe. I’m here. I’m here to help. It’s okay, it will be okay. You are loved. You are safe.

Not safe. Her fingers stuttered and stumbled over the movement, but she repeated it over and over until he noticed.

“Not safe?” he echoed, letting go to use his own hands in her lap where she could see. “Tell me. What isn’t?”

Me. Here. Sick. Bad. Not safe.

He was silent, still except for the steady rise and fall of breath.

Then, “What makes you feel not safe?”

Sick. Weak. She hurt. Her skin was on fire. She needed him to understand, to not carry her to where the others waited, but she didn’t know how to explain.

No. Her hand found her side, where old wounds puckered. **NO.**

Another breath, different, sucked in like he was the one hurt. When he let it out, she could feel the air against her scalp.

He never rushed. He could be fast, so fast it startled her, the speed misaligned with his size, but he never rushed himself or her. There were several long heartbeats of silence before he offered, with a tentativeness to his voice, “Your room or mine?”

Not the infirmary downstairs, open and cavernous and indefensible. He understood that, at least. Cass thought briefly of Bruce’s room, territory he knew best and could defend from all invaders, but shuddered at the idea of the unending space.

Cass tapped her own chest

Bruce carried her. She wasn’t sure even after if he deliberately chose paths that kept them out of the sight of others, or if he managed to wave them off. Either way, she was aware of no one, though she listened with all her strength for the whisper of breath or the soft shush of footfall.

Navigating her room was tricky. Bruce had to step carefully to keep his footing and not to twist his back too much as he crossed the narrow space from the door to the bed.

Bad, her brain whispered. She was putting him at risk. She almost asked to be put down, but then she was down, nestled back in the familiar blankets of her bed.

“Light,” Bruce warned, then flicked on the bedside lamp. Cass winced and turned her face away.

She must have drifted some, because she startled at the soft knock at the door.

“No—” she began, throat tight with fear.

Bruce’s hand on her shoulder stilled her. He lowered his face so she could see it clearly, every line lit by the pink and gold glow of her ladybug lamp. “They would have to get through me first, and I won’t let them.”

This was a Batman promise and a Bruce promise both, the core of him where they were one and the same. Whoever was at the door, whatever they wanted, they would not be able to cross the threshold unless he was dead, truly dead. And even then he might find a way to stop them.

“No one comes in,” Bruce promised again, and there were no lies that she could see. With a gentle squeeze to her shoulder, he moved to the door, keeping his body between her and whoever was on the other side.

No one else came into her room, and Bruce didn’t leave. Every time she woke, he was there, checking the bandages on her arm, readjusting her pillow, lifting a glass of water or spoonful of Alfred’s soup to her lips. Once she woke and he was curled up at the very edge of her bed, a bear trying to take up the space of cat, her Mothman pillow bunched under his head. A moment under the weight of her attention was all it took, and then he was sitting up, reaching for the thermometer, her water, the light.

“Explain to me,” he said, voice flat like an order but soft enough she knew it was a request, “how this happened.”

He was sitting on the edge of her bed, between her and the window, one flat-tipped finger tapping against the edge of the bandage on her arm. There were lines in his face, tired valleys of shadow, and his hair was a spiky, tousled mess of gray and black. The light from the window softened all his edges. He looked like love.

It was enough, the physical evidence of him and her fever-wracked days, to pull from her the answer she didn’t want to give.

“Cat,” Cass whispered past the lump in her throat. She was scared even still, scared that he would blame that soft, frightened kitten for defending itself, or Damian for letting it escape, or her for catching it herself rather than calling for help.

She knew who he was. She knew who he was not. But fear was not fair.

“Cat,” Bruce repeated.

Cat. Under my bed. It was scared. Not its fault. Not its fault.

Bruce breathed, in and out, and she made herself breathe as well.

“You didn’t clean the wound,” Bruce said. He took her arm then, cradling the bandaged lower half like it was fragile. “Why?”

Cass shrugged with her other shoulder. It hadn’t seemed important. It had only been a few scratches, just a little bit of blood.

Bruce shook his head slowly. “You know better.” There was no blame there, just heaviness. He shifted his hands, freeing one to push a lock of hair, freshly cleaned for the first time in days, behind her ear. “You weren’t showering. You were angry with me.”

Cass could feel heat in her face, like the fever returned, but with the bite of shame.

“Mad,” she admitted, but her voice cracked halfway through. “Sad.”

She could see it, her sadness reflecting in his face. Too many were too stupid to see, thinking because he held still and silent that he didn’t feel, when he felt everything, hers and his and everyone he loved. It hurt, to love this much. She didn’t know how he carried it.

“Tell me why,” he murmured, hand still cupping her cheek and her wrist.

She didn’t know. Not didn’t know how to say, but didn’t *know*.

“Punishing yourself?” he prompted, the question held lightly, to be thrown away if it was wrong. “Why?”

Punishing herself? Had she been doing that?

Cass’s brow creased, thinking of the long, hard patrols, wet and cold and miserable, and crashing into bed without a shower or her favorite sweatshirt. Of food half-eaten in her room, left to mold. Of untended wounds. Of short tempers and impulsive fistfights.

Oh.

But the question remained. Why?

She shook her head slowly, unsure, still reexamining what she had

felt, what she had done. This was new still, new as words, new as hugs. What she felt hadn't mattered before.

Oh.

"Bad," Cass whispered, tears finally escaping her eyes to wet her cheeks.

It was the tiniest movement, but as loud to her as a gunshot. Bruce flinched.

"I…"

She was already shaking her head. Not that. Not the warehouse, though he had been right. She was a bad teammate.

"Left." She abandoned words, tried to explain with her hands. **You left. But I left. Left Gotham. Left the team.**

He left and it hadn't been his fault, and when he came back, he tried. He tried so hard, hard enough that they could all see it, to make things better. She didn't. She didn't know how.

"Time," was the only answer he could give. Her face shifted, and his cracked into a wry smile in response. "I know. Time. And trying."

Trying. "They don't trust me."

He couldn't deny that, not when he knew what she saw. To her surprise, he didn't try to deny it, just rolled one large shoulder as if brushing away an old ache. "Time," he said again.

She sniffled. "What if never?"

"Never never."

The dry playfulness of it was enough to startle a weak chuckle out of her. She closed her eyes as calloused thumbs swiped tears from her face, then nuzzled her cheek against his hand.

"Who are you?" he asked, Batman and Bruce both.

"Black Bat," she answered without hesitation, but frowned when he shook his head.

"No." He tapped a finger against her chest, against the soft warmth of her favorite hoodie. "Who are *you*?"

“Cass,” Cass said. “Cassandra.”

“Cassandra Wayne,” he agreed, weight leaning on the last name.

He had changed it within weeks of bringing her home. So much mess, so much to fix, and he had still brought her the papers and explained every line, what they meant for her now, what they would mean for her in the future. She had cried then, too, feeling the *Cain* erased.

“You are a part of this team, this family, always. Forever. No matter what names you wear or what rests here.” He tapped her chest again. “A good part. Necessary part.”

Bruce bent and pressed a kiss to her forehead, then ducked his head to rest his own forehead against the part he kissed and to make her look into his eyes, so she could see only truth. “Loved part. Understand?”

She gave a small nod, throat too tight to speak.

“No more hiding. No more running.”

No more leaving.

“Trust,” he murmured. “Trust me, until you learn to trust them. Trust them, and they will trust you.”

She didn’t believe it. But she believed him.

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